



Start in Manchester uses art as a vehicle to help people recovering from serious mental distress re-establish their lives in their communities. Wendy Teall, Annie Tortora-Cailey and Jill Cunningham describe one recent project with Manchester University's Whitworth Art Gallery that aimed to explore how and why arts work is so good for mental health and well-being.

Voyage on a painted sea

Start in Manchester has been working in a socially inclusive way for many years. Using art as our vehicle, we work with people who are recovering from a period of serious mental distress, helping them to rebuild confidence, make links to their local community and find new roles for themselves.

Start is part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust. The team includes specialist artists, a horticulturalist, an administrator and an occupational therapist. We work closely with other trust mental health staff.

Start has attracted acclaim as a leading service of its type in England, and has won two awards. We regularly team up with partners in our community to offer special projects, such as work placements and accredited learning and gallery-based courses.

This is the story of an arts project at Manchester University's Whitworth Art Gallery, which was run by Start's artists working in partnership with experts from the gallery. We called the project Getting to Know Alfred Wallis, and an early account of this initiative was described in the August 2004 issue of *A Life in the Day* (volume 8, issue 3). It aimed to build mental well-being among our service users and encourage social inclusion. The project finished with an award-nominated exhibition, called *Now, Voyager*; the title was inspired by lines from a poem by Walt Whitman. It was visited by over 40,000 people.

Why do we work with art?

From our many years of experience at Start, we know art can have a uniquely protective and healing effect on mental well-being. Why is this? Art helps us to relax, offers us a means of self-expression, assists us with exploring identity, and builds our skills.

All these factors are vital in protecting well-being. Relaxation, for example, reduces blood pressure and boosts the immune system, while building resilience to stress (Benson & Klipper,



Photo: C. Fortune

One of the exhibits from *Now, Voyager*



Photo: G. Teu, University of Manchester

Whitworth Art Gallery – the Now, Voyager exhibition

2000). Self-expression is strongly linked to exploration of the self and the building of identity. These factors are important to everyone, but particularly so during a period of emotional distress when a person may feel that they have lost touch with themselves and with their ability to express their feelings in words (Pettie & Triolo, 1999).

Skills building is another beneficial aspect of art. The skills that artists acquire enable them to create objects of beauty and worth. Crucially, these objects have a value that others will recognise and admire, and so a sense of achievement is formed, as well as enhanced self-esteem.

These benefits of art are well-recognised, but as a group of specialist artists working in mental health care, we felt there was more to say. There are key ways in which art activities build thinking patterns that help with managing anxiety and stress, and encourage the development of coping strategies. We decided to design a project that would explore how and why art is so good at this, and present what we learned to the public, in the form of a visual arts exhibition at a gallery.

Working with a gallery

Social inclusion is a vital part of our work at Start, so running our planned project in a mainstream setting through which we could build links to our local community was important to us. We formed a partnership with the Whitworth Art Gallery, and this gave us access to its unique resources. It also allowed us to work with its staff, resulting in two mutual benefits: establishing the gallery as welcoming space for our service users in the future, and reaching a huge new audience with positive information about mental health issues.

Shaping up the project

We worked with gallery staff to design an intensive course focused around the painting *The Island*, by outsider artist Alfred Wallis. We chose this painting because Wallis's own life story is interesting and relevant to the use of art for well-being. His paintings also tend to arouse strong, emotion-based opinions, and that was to be our starting point. We wanted to help our service users improve their ability to think around and understand strong emotions, especially negative emotions, as these are often a feature of living

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with mental distress. Research has shown that if people can acquire more strategies for dealing with negative thoughts and emotions in a positive, confident way, then they are less vulnerable to stress and thereby more empowered (Sorenson, 2002).

To help our service users explore and understand emotion and perceive the influence of new types of thinking styles, we began the course by discussing our gut reactions to *The Island*. Responses were strong, and fairly divided. We then told service users Wallis's life story and, even after this initial session, people's responses to the painting began subtly to alter, showing that knowledge changes perception and tempers simple emotional reactions.

During the following weeks, service users enjoyed art history, creative writing, discussion, and practical art sessions. At the end of each session, service users spent time in small groups reflecting about what they had learned that day, and how this had changed their response to *The Island*. Knowledge about the painting built up layer by layer every week, until service users had a sophisticated understanding of its techniques and its historical and cultural context. Gradually, opinions about the painting changed from a straightforward 'love it/hate it', to a response of greater depth that showed critical awareness of individual reactions to a work of art.

'At first, I thought the painting was rubbish... but at the end of the course I realised I liked it... I had changed and not the painting.'



Photo: W. Teall

Looking at Wallis

'[I realised that] art is the relationship between the viewer and viewed.'

Service users' gains

In the classroom, service users showed new abilities to form opinions confidently, to talk in group situations, and to manage anxiety inside the gallery. They also experienced new ways of seeing themselves and their work in relation to other artists.

These changes in personal skills were significant, and allowed service users to gain exponentially from the course as it unfolded. Even more exciting, things began to develop for service users outside the classroom too. Benefits were noted by service users in all sorts of situations, and were felt to continue long after the course had concluded. We know this through feedback given by 10 out of the 14 service users and recorded during the course, at the end of the course, and again at one and two years later.

Here is some of that feedback. Seven out of the ten participants said the course had significantly raised their confidence levels, and this continued after the course. Half reported better anxiety management alongside gains in confidence. All felt more able to express an opinion, with many finding greater ease speaking in front of others. Some described a cascade effect on confidence in social situations:

'The course helped me come out from under.'

'[With regard to] meeting and talking with strangers... since doing the course I have had more confidence to talk in groups than I have had for years.'

All felt they had become more open-minded about art, with 80% feeling they could understand and critique artworks better. Some service users said the critical/analytical thinking skills acquired had had a surprise bonus effect:

'[I found that] critical analysis is a life skill appropriate to many circumstances...'

I am more aware of my own biases and prejudices and this gives more control over mind.'

Overall, 90% of the service users felt the course had enabled them to make lasting changes in various ways.

Service users varied widely in terms of artistic experience and length of time studying at Start, and yet all who completed the course managed to make gains of a similar significance.

Joined-up thinking and art

Everyone giving feedback noted how much they had benefited from the particular mix of activities on the course. These were practical and theoretical, reflective and self-expressive. Activities also mixed listening and looking with doing and making, so offering triggers to all sorts of learning styles within the student group.

This wide range of activities – stimulating the heart, the hand and the head – is a way of encouraging joined-up thinking between the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Such left/right brain conversations are important because they bring our expressive and logical thinking centres together and this is believed to enhance creative thinking and problem-solving (Buzan, 2001; de Bono, 1992; Carter & Frith, 1998). Of course, if we can think around problems, it goes without saying that we will cope better with stress, so this is an important life skill to acquire.

Interestingly, research shows us that art is exceptionally efficient at promoting left/right brain thinking. This is because it not only demands use of the visual, spatial and expressive right-hand side of the brain (Edwards, 1992); it also stimulates the logical left-hand side of the brain as well, through the need to design, problem-solve and think critically (Gabora, 2002; Press, 1997). In this way art can enhance the skills that help us cope with stress and manage our lives.

Field studies confirm this. Creek (2001) and White (2003) show how people taking part in art

activities gradually demonstrated more flexible thinking skills, by showing steadily improving problem-solving abilities in their art classes. These new skills impacted on their daily lives as well. For example, White's study showed how participants in an art group were eventually able to reduce their use of antidepressants as a result of their studies.

Coming back to Start's special course, we have put this research into practice. In having practical art as our main focus, and through including extra analytical, self-expressive and reflective activities, we deliberately aimed to help our service users acquire better skills in understanding and dealing constructively with negative emotion. The feedback above shows how well this worked.

Conclusion

At Start we believe passionately in a future where everyone pays attention to their own and others' emotional well-being, and where social inclusion is taken for granted. This project shows how art activities, if experienced in particular



Photo: W. Teall

Participants in Start's art classes

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ways, work effectively towards these aims at two levels. The first level is individual, and our course feedback results show art working for each person as a protector and healer. The second level is societal. The exhibition *Now, Voyager* that we held at the end of the *Getting to Know Alfred Wallis* project has attracted wide praise, as well as high visitor numbers, and feedback has been reflective, open-minded and warm.

We have been thrilled at the response to our work at both these levels. In sharing with our local community an arts experience that is about personal change, we find that we may have changed more hearts and minds than we thought possible.

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